Maraud awoke to the sound of retching — a retching so violent his own stomach clenched into a fist and tried to punch its way out of his throat.

That's when he realized the retching noises were his.

“That’s right, big guy. Let it all out.”

A woman’s voice. “Lucinda?” he croaked.

“What kind of fool asks for the woman who just tried to poison him?”

He knew that voice.

“A straw-headed fool, that’s who.”

That one, too. Should be able to place them both. Saints! Why was he so disoriented? He cracked open an eye, only to find the world bobbing up and down, furthering his stomach’s revolt. He shut his eye again.

“She didn’t poison him,” a third voice grunted.

Tassin. The name came to him so easily he almost wept.

“She most certainly did.” Andry.

“Tassin’s right.” The woman again — Valine. “She wouldn’t save him, then poison him.”
“I disagree.”
Maraud considered it a major victory that he recognized Jaspar’s voice right away.

“Maybe she wanted the pleasure of killing him herself. She would not be the first to do so.”
As he tried to sit up, Valine said something, but her words were lost as he struggled to keep from puking up his liver.

Hell. He was sitting up — more or less. On his horse. He shifted, which caused a tug around his middle. Not sitting on his horse. Tied.

“Whoa, there!” Valine drew her mount close to his. “Not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’m fine,” Maraud gritted out between clenched teeth, afraid if he opened his mouth too far, he’d spew all over her.

“If you think you can stay in your saddle, I can untie you.”

“In a minute.” He willed the world to stop swooping around like a drunken stable boy. “On second thought, leave it. This way I can doze off again if I need to.”

Valine arched one dark brow in amusement, and a strange, strangled sound came from his right, like a goose stuck in a trumpet. He turned — slowly! — to find Tassin . . . laughing? Maraud hadn’t seen him laugh in — Christ. Had he ever seen him laugh?

“So.” Andry got back to the business at hand. “Do we follow her?”
Follow her. The woman who tried to poison him three times. And outright lied to his face ten times that. Not to mention she’d planned to trade him as if he were a pig at a fair.

“No.” Lucinda made her bed, now she could lie in it. He put his heels to his horse’s flanks. A good bracing gallop should clear his head.

Or cause him to dump the contents of his stomach. Only time would tell.
Whether one is raised at a convent that serves Death or in a tavern room filled with whores, there is one lesson that always applies: There is no room for mistakes. The wrong amount of poison, the incorrect angle of the knife, poor aim, or a false gesture when pretending to be someone else can result in disaster, if not death.

It was the same at the tavern where I spent my earliest years. How many of my aunts would have had other lives, but for one mistake? Some, like my mother, chose their path. But for others, it was too many years of poor harvests, or crossing the tanner’s guild, which was always looking for excuses to remove its female members. Being alone at the wrong moment, catching the eye of the wrong man might send one’s life skidding down the slope of destiny into a midden heap.

Which is precisely where I have landed.

The shadows in my darkened room loom large as I run my fingers along the silky edges of the crow feather. The good news is the convent did not abandon me. The bad news: They might, once they learn what I have done.

And what will the king do with this knowledge of the convent I so foolishly handed him? He knew nothing about it until I spoke of
its existence. Will his anger pass like a sudden summer shower, or will it fester and grow?

Far off in the distance, a cock crows. Morning comes, but no answers with it. I have spent the night trying to convince myself that, after five years of their silence, I owe them nothing. But the sick shaking that has kept me awake all night tells me my heart believes something else.

Which do I listen to?

Once before, I did not listen to my heart. Come with us, Maraud said. We can help.

Maraud. Even though he did not know what I was facing, he offered his help. His friendship. And so much more.

I have stood at only five crossroads in my life, and of all of them, that is the one I regret the most. Not trusting Maraud and accepting that help. Indeed, I have ensured he will loathe me as much as the king does. My name will be a curse upon the convent's lips and reviled for generations. Truly, the wreckage I have left in my wake is breathtaking.

Thinking of Maraud is like rubbing my heart against broken glass, so I shove all thoughts of him aside. I must find a way to fix this — to unsay those words to the king. Or at the very least, convince him they are far less important than he thinks they are. But he may not ever call for me again or may decide to have me thrown into the dungeon.

Something deep inside warns me that it is possible this cannot be fixed. Have I broken a piece of crockery that can be glued back together, or shattered a crystal goblet that is irreplaceable? As if in answer, the fine hairs at the nape of my neck lift in warning, and I realize I am not alone.

I shift my hand toward the knife I keep under my pillow.

"Good morning." It is a woman's voice, low and melodious. Surely someone sent by the convent to punish me would not use such a cheerful greeting.

I peer into the shadows for the source of the voice.

It laughs, a note of earthiness among the lilting sounds. "You do not need your knife for me, little sister. Did you not see the feather I left you?"

Keeping the knife hidden in the folds of my gown, I sit up. "I saw a crow
feather.” My words are as carefully measured as pennies from a beggar’s purse. “But crows are a most common bird.” The young woman — mayhap a year or two older than myself — sits in the room’s lone chair. Even though she is cast in shadow, it is clear that she is impossibly beautiful — the contours of her face so elegantly constructed that it borders on being a weapon in its own right. While I cannot see if she is smiling, I sense her amusement, all the same.

“Who else would leave you such a thing?”

I shrug one shoulder. “The French court is a complex and devious place, my lady. Messages can be intercepted and twisted to suit any number of intentions.”

“You are wise to be cautious. But have no fear, I am well and truly convent sent — and your sister, besides.”

My sister. The words throw me off balance as surely as a well-placed kick. This woman. Margot. All of us at the convent are sisters. And I have betrayed them.

*They betrayed me first.*

I shove my hair out of my face. “If that is the case, if you are well and truly my sister . . .” Weeks — nay, months — of anger swell up, as unstoppable as the tide. “Then I have to ask, what in the *rutting bell* took you so long?”

She blinks, the only hint this might not be the greeting she was expecting. “You only just arrived, what, three — four — days ago?”

Heat rises in my gorge, making my words harsh. “I’m not talking about the last three days. I’ve been waiting for *five years*.”

A flash of vexation distorts her face, but her voice remains calm. “The convent has been in disarray these last few months. No one was aware you had been removed from the regent’s household.”

The words dangle like bait. I want to believe them, but to do so means that I fell into a trap of Count Angoulême’s making. “Surely they knew of my change in residence, else why was my patron receiving letters of instructions regarding me?”

The woman grimaces — the grimace giving me more hope than any words she has spoken. “There have been many changes at the convent. The details of your and Margot’s location were missing.”

5
“We were not a pair of boots or a prayer book to be lost. We were two young girls left with no means of communication, no direction nor orders, nothing for nearly a third of our lives.”

Her earlier warmth cools somewhat. “We have been rather distracted by France’s invasion, the warring amongst the duchess’s betrothed, and the matter of securing both her and our country’s safety,” she says dryly. “Surely the nature of your assignment was explained to you?”

“That was no assignment, but abandonment. We assumed you’d forgotten about us.”

“You could certainly be forgiven for thinking that.”

I don’t want compassion, but answers. No, what I truly want is to slog back through time and unsay the words I spoke to the king. To undo my grievous mistake. But since she cannot give me that, answers I shall have. “Had you forgotten about us?”

She studies me, weighing how much to say. For all of her sympathetic manner, I must not underestimate this woman.

“I only learned of your existence two months ago,” she says at last. “When I was assigned to accompany the duchess to France.”

While her words bear the weight of truth, I also sense there is more to it than that. Frustration hums through my veins. “There are others at the convent besides yourself. Why not send someone sooner?”

Just as the convent taught us, she pivots, going on the offense. “Why?” she demands. “Are you indulging in a fit of temper, or has something happened to make timing of the essence?”

Because everything inside me wishes to avoid her question, I lean forward instead, not caring that it brings my dagger out into the open. “If you want to come back into my life after five years of nothing, you’ll have to start with some explanations. Something far more satisfactory than ‘we were busy.’”

She does not so much as spare my weapon a glance, but inclines her head, imbuing the movement with feline grace. “Very well. You are owed that at least.” For some reason, the sympathy in her voice infuriates me. She knows why we were left to molder.
“The abbess who sent you and Margot to France was an impostor.” Although she speaks clearly enough, the words scarcely make sense. “She was not a daughter of Mortain. Was not sired by the god of death. The person controlling all of our lives was not interested in the well-being of his daughters. Only her own.”

Her words hit me like a blow, and I struggle to grasp the enormity of what she claims. “How could such a thing happen?”

For the first time, she looks away, toward the window. “Sometimes the sheer scope and daring of a plan make it impossible to see it for the lie that it is.” Her gaze shifts back to me. “I am sorry that you were abandoned. Sorry that even now, you feel you must protect yourself with that knife.”

The sincerity of her words permeates my fog of anger, and for a moment, I want to throw myself into the comfort she is offering. Until I remember that she would never offer such comfort if she knew what I have done. Would possibly kill me on the spot.

“Many of the decisions the abbess made were designed to keep her own secrets.” The note of bitterness in her voice is personal, hiding closely held pain. She, too, has been hurt by this woman.

“Is the abbess going to be punished for what she’s done?”

The woman studies me a moment before answering. “A convocation of the Nine was called. She was put on trial, stripped of her position, and is now serving the crones of Dea Matrona, making amends for those she should have mothered but failed.”

I nod, but it is not enough. Not for the enormity of what her crimes have cost me. Cost Margot. Will have cost this entire convent when the truth of what I have done is laid bare. “When did that happen?”

“The abbess was removed nearly two months ago.”

“What day precisely?” Two months was before Angoulême claimed to have received the fateful letter, but letters take time to reach their destination. Could she have sent it, or was it truly a deception on Angoulême’s part?

“The convocation was called on the eighteenth of November. The abbess was relieved of her duties two days prior to that.”
This answer is as helpful as a knife made of sheep's wool. It is possible that the abbess sent the letter.

“That does not explain where you have been for the last two months.” Margot was still alive two months ago. Not that this woman could have saved her, but the red, angry part of my soul does not care.

“The convent records were woefully inadequate and provided nothing to help us find you.”

“But I have been in Plessis for four days!” If she had found me even a single day earlier, I would not have exposed the convent to the king.

“It is a big palace with a large number of retainers. With my duties to the queen, I do not always know the moment a new person arrives. Especially if they are not formally announced.” She grows still, her head cocking to one side as she studies me anew. I can practically see the rash of questions she is forming.

Since I’ve no wish to answer any of them, I toss another one of my own at her. “How did you learn I was here?”

“I came upon you praying in the chapel. It wasn’t until you placed an offering in one of the niches on the wall that I guessed.” She opens her hand. The bright red of my holly berry makes her skin look unnaturally white. “I couldn’t see what it was, nor understand the significance of it, until you had already left. And then there were pressing matters I had to attend to.” A cold, hard look flashes briefly across her face. A look that sends goose bumps down my spine and warns me that she would not hesitate to shove a knife in my back if my actions warranted it.

But even that knowledge doesn’t temper the anger lapping along my skin like flames. Pressing matters. But for a hand span of hours, I would not have ruined everything. “You should have come sooner.” The words are empty, those of a desperate child, but I utter them nonetheless, as if by repeating them often enough, I can make the fault hers, not mine.

“I came last night, as soon as I was certain. You weren’t here. Where were you?”

“I was at dinner, with the rest of the court.”

“It was later than that. When everyone else was abed.”
As I consider what to tell her, the silence between us lengthens. Her fingers are drifting to the edge of her sleeve when a sharp rap on the door stills her hand.

“Demoiselle Genevieve?” a voice calls out.

Relief surges through me. “Coming!” I hop from the bed and straighten my skirts and bodice.

“Why are you being summoned?” The question is as sharp as I imagine her knives to be.

“We shall find out,” I snap, shoving my hair into some semblance of order. When I reach the door, I am surprised to find the steward standing in the hallway. I curtsy. “My lord, how may I serve?”

“I am sorry to disturb you, demoiselle, but the king is looking for Lady Sybella. One of the other ladies said she thought she saw her heading toward your chambers.”

Sybella. I roll the name across my tongue. Grateful for this reprieve, for a chance to digest what little she has told me, I turn to her. “Apparently, you are the one being summoned.”
As I step out of Genevieve’s room into the hallway, I wonder if she knows just how much she owes the king’s steward. I was within a hair’s breadth of grabbing her by the shoulders, giving her a hard shake, and ordering her to pull herself together. There are far larger problems than hurt feelings and wounded pride to deal with right now.

Perhaps that is the darkness in me — once embraced, it continues to push and prod until I do its infernal bidding. Or perhaps it is simply that between the regent’s plotting, the king’s indifference, my sisters’ danger, and the queen’s illness, I have no patience for such indulgences.

“This way, my lady.” As the steward steps in front of me, I hear Genevieve slip into the hallway behind us. Not her footsteps, for they are as light as any assassin’s should be. It is her heart I hear, beating the slightly too rapid rhythm it has had since she first discovered me in her room.

For so long I’ve held out hope of finding one of the convent’s elusive moles, but instead of gaining an ally, I have found an angry and sullen girl. One who is hiding something. But what — and why — elude me. Why is nothing in this benighted court ever simple?

I resist the urge to scowl in annoyance, and keep my face carefully blank. Why does the king wish to see me? I can think of no good reason for the request — and many disastrous ones. My mind sorts
through possible plans and explanations, devising lies I can tell convincingly, and truths I can share without exposing myself.

When the steward speaks to the sentries at the king’s door, I fall back beside Genevieve. “Where is Margot?” I ask, my attention firmly fixed on the steward. “I fear we may need her shortly.” Because of Genevieve’s evasiveness, I am no longer certain she can be trusted.

“Margot will not be coming.”

At the note of finality in her voice, I tear my gaze from the steward. “Why not?”

She meets my eyes coolly. “Because she is dead.”

Her words barely have time to register before the steward announces me to the king. “The Lady Sybella, Your Majesty. As you requested.” With my mind still reeling from Genevieve’s news, I am ushered into the room. There is a faint rustle of silk as Genevieve slips in behind me and drifts — as silent and unobtrusive as a ghost — to stand among the other courtiers at the fringes of the room.

But I can spare her no more thought. The king sits on his throne with a cluster of military men and bishops behind him. Something about his manner has shifted since yesterday, although I cannot put my finger on it. The queen is not present, but the regent stands to his right. It is not until she steps away from the man she is speaking with — my brother’s lawyer, Monsieur Fremin — that my worst fears are awakened.

I force a placid, bemused smile upon my face. When Fremin sees me, he takes three steps forward. Only the formality of our surroundings keeps him from launching himself at me. “What have you done with my men?”

I halt, recoiling slightly, as if his abrasive behavior is threatening to me.

“Monsieur Fremin,” the king remonstrates. “I did not give you leave to assault the women of the court.”

Fremin fumes like a pot on a raging boil, but clamps his mouth shut and tries to collect himself. I alter my stride, imbuing my movement with hesitation. When I am in front of the throne, I sink into a deep curtsy. “Your Majesty. How may I serve you?”
When I rise, the king’s gaze rests upon me. It is far less friendly and approving than it was just two days before. “Monsieur Fremin’s attendants have gone missing. He thinks you know something about their disappearance.”

Unable to contain himself any longer, Fremin steps closer, attempting to tower over me. “What happened to them?” He is nearly rigid with rage.

And fear. I do not envy him having to report his failure back to Pierre. “What happened to whom?” I ask bemusedly.

He takes another step closer. “My men are missing, and you are behind it.”

“Me?” I fill my voice with incredulity, trying to draw the king into the absurdity of such an accusation, but the way he studies me sends a ripple of apprehension across my shoulders. “How could I have caused your men to go missing?” I glance again at the king. He can’t possibly believe Fremin. I have given him no cause to do so. “Mayhap they simply headed home early?” I suggest.

“They would never do that.”

“Then mayhap they went wining and dicing, and have not yet come back? They would not be the first men to do so.”

The king ignores my suggestion, and my unease grows. “When we had someone sent to your room to fetch you here, the woman told us your room was empty. Your sisters weren’t there, nor your attendants.”

My heart plummets like a stone. Before it has reached the bottom of my stomach, I know what I must do, and allow pure terror to show on my face. “Your Majesty, that cannot be true! They were happily playing with their nurse when I left this morning to attend upon the queen!”

“And yet we did not find you with the queen when we went looking for you,” the regent points out.

I do not so much as look at her. It is the king my performance must convince. “And now you say they aren’t there?” I color my voice with distress and clasp my hands together tightly — as if only just barely managing not to wring them. “Who was sent?”

The regent answers. “Martine.”
My gaze frantically searches out Martine's short figure. I take a step in her
direction. “Are you certain? Could they not be outside, taking in some air?”

Martine shakes her head primly.

“We sent men to check precisely that,” says the regent, “once Martine
returned with her report.”

Casting all conventions aside, I whirl back to face the king and throw myself
onto the floor at his feet. “Please, Your Majesty! This is most alarming news.
May I have leave to go see for myself? Perhaps they are playing some game or
hiding from each other?”

“But of course. Your concern is understandable.” At least he is not so con-
vinced of Fremin’s claims that he dismisses my request outright.

“You can’t let her go alone,” Fremin protests. “She might try to run.”

The king casts an aggrieved look at the lawyer. “She will not run without
her sisters, Monsieur Fremin. Nevertheless, she will have an escort.” He waves
his hand, and the regent and Martine step forward. As they take up position on
either side of me, I head for the door. When the king turns to speak with his
bishops, I feel Genevieve fall into step behind me. I wish that our first meeting
had gone better so I could know whether she is simply curious or intends to
guard my back.

As soon as we have cleared the fourth flight of stairs, I lift my skirts and break
into a run. I throw the door to my room open and race inside. It is, indeed,
empty. My hand flies to my mouth, as if to prevent a cry of alarm from escaping.
I hurry toward the bed, yanking aside the canopies, tossing the bolsters to the
floor, and pulling the counterpane from the mattress. Widening my eyes as if
panicked, I call out, “Charlotte! Louise! Come out now, this is not funny!”

As the others watch, I drop to my knees and look under the bed, then
rise and hurry to the window. I pull back the drapes and press my face against
the glass, as if checking to see if they have fallen. It is easy enough to convey a
mounting sense of alarm. I do not even have to pretend. What could have so emboldened Fremin that he would take this matter to the king?

I check the fireplace next, even looking up the chimney. “They’re gone,” I finally say, my voice small and hollow. “Not just them, but everything. Their clothes, their sewing, their dolls. All gone.”

It is a testament to my acting abilities that both Martine and the regent look discomfited. In the awkward silence that fills the room, Genevieve steps forward to take my elbow and help me rise from the hearth. “My lady, calm yourself. You did not know your sisters were leaving?”

I cannot tell what role she is playing, but use it for my own purposes. “No. There were no plans for them to go anywhere. Both had been ill recently and were being kept to their rooms.”

“Well,” the regent says briskly. “You’ve seen for yourself that they’re gone. The king has indulged you in this. Let us not make him wait any longer.”

I head directly toward Fremin once we reach the audience chamber. “You!” The word is so forceful he rocks back on his heels. “You did this. Where have you taken my sisters?”

“What are you blathering about? It is my men who are missing.”

“As are my sisters.” I take another step toward him. “You were most displeased with the king’s ruling. You even asked to see Charlotte and Louise afterward.” Although I long to back him up against the wall, I force myself to maintain my decorum. “When you could not get what you wanted by legitimate means, you took matters into your own hands.”

His face drains of some of its florid color as I publicly name the very thing he had been planning. “D-don’t be absurd. You only say that to cover your own actions.”

“Enough.” The king’s voice is as effective as a bucket of cold water on snarling dogs.
I am immediately contrite. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. My distress has caused me to forget myself.”

“It is understandable, Lady Sybella. The news of your sisters complicates things a great deal.” He gazes at Fremin, annoyed that the lawyer did not share this piece of the puzzle.

“Your Majesty! How was I to know the girls were not there?”

“How indeed,” a male voice muses, but I dare not look to see who it is.

There are few choices available to me on how best to play this, so I plunge ahead, using the truth to bolster my lies. “Your Majesty, I saw Monsieur’s attendants sitting in the antechamber the day he arrived. They are not mere attendants, or men-at-arms or even a simple escort. I know those men from the years I spent in my father’s household. They are the worst cutthroats among the men that serve my family. Men the d’Albrets have used to do their most unsavory deeds.

“At the time, I thought it unusual for a lawyer to have such an escort, but I assumed it was because the war was over and they had to find something for such men to do. But now, now their purpose is made clear. He would not need those sorts of men if he intended only to escort two young girls back to their family.”

The king whips his head around to spear Fremin with a look. “Who were these men who accompanied you?”

The lawyer swallows before speaking. “Their names do not matter, Your Majesty. What matters is that they are missing.”

“Oh, but their names do matter,” I continue, committing fully to this course of action. “I’ve no doubt some of your own men will have heard of Yann le Poisson.” There is an audible intake of breath. “Or of Maldon the Pious.” That name is followed by another susurration of whispers. “I know his exploits and strange taste for self-punishment have long been the source of rumor and gossip. And the Marquis? How many Frenchmen have been betrayed by him?”

From somewhere behind the king, a large man steps forward. “I have heard of these men.” His deep rumbling voice is so very familiar that I wrench my gaze
from the king to look at him. “They are precisely as she claims.” He is uncommonly large — his nose, his jowls — everything but his eyes, which are small and narrow set. He has eschewed the more distinguished long robes of the king’s other advisors and instead wears a shorter military style, complete with vambraces. His deep blue mantle is held in place by two gold brooches.

By his sheer size and ugliness, he can only be Beast’s father, although his face has none of the charm or good humor that Beast’s possesses. I drop my eyes quickly lest he see the spark of recognition in them. Merde. Can the gods lob any more disasters at me this morning?

A new suspicion glints in the king’s eyes as he stares at Fremin. “What say you, lawyer? General Cassel has corroborated Lady Sybella’s claims.”

Cassel. The name goes off in my head like an alarm bell. Look . . . to . . . cas . . . tle were Captain Dunois’s — oh, how I miss his stolid presence! — words to me. Was he warning me of this man? But I cannot think about that now. Not with the king and Cassel himself watching me with coolly assessing eyes.

Fremin swallows again — a nervous habit I am quickly learning to recognize. “The road is a dangerous place, Your Majesty. Especially with so many mercenary’s recently released from service. With such valuable cargo, of course Lord d’Albret would send his most skilled men.”

“‘There is skill, and then there is brutality,” I point out.

“Are you saying your brother would put your sisters in danger by sending brutish men to accompany them, Lady Sybella?” It is the first time the regent has spoken since we returned from my room.

Yes, I want to scream at her. They will always be in danger from him and their family. “I am saying he would send brutish men to retrieve them through unofficial channels should official channels not rule in his favor.”

With his eyes still on me, General Cassel leans down and speaks directly into the king’s ear. A flicker of annoyance crosses the regent’s face, and she leans ever so slightly closer in an attempt to hear.

When Cassel is finished, the king nods in agreement. “I must think upon this, for it is not as straightforward as first presented. Monsieur Fremin, you are excused for now. But do not leave the palace without consulting my marshal.
or General Cassel.” Fremin starts to protest. “I have not said I am putting the matter aside. You may rest assured that I will get to the bottom of this. Unless you doubt me?”

Fremin swallows the rest of his protestation and bows. “Never, Your Majesty.”

“Then leave. All of you,” the king growls.

Relieved at the dismissal, I sink into another deep curtsy. But as I move to disperse with the others, he stops me. “Stay a moment, Lady Sybella.” My brief hope of an easy victory crumples. He waves at the regent, Cassel, and the two bishops to stay, then studies me, mouth pursed in thought. “I am told that when they searched for you this morning, they found you in a chamber that . . . wasn’t your own.”

“That is true, Your Majesty.”

Since he is careful not to declare Genevieve’s identity, I do not either. He falls quiet again, and I can practically hear the wheels of his mind churning.

“So tell me, are you from the convent of Saint Mortain?”

The ground at my feet shifts and lurches, dread seeping into my bones. In the utter silence of the room, the regent looks sharply at the king. One of the bishops crosses himself, while the other clutches the thick gold crucifix that hangs at his neck. For a brief moment, I consider denying it, but since it is clear he knows — or suspects — lying would only make it worse.

“It is true that I was raised at the convent of Saint Mortain, Your Majesty, as are a number of the women of Brittany.”

“Have you been trained in the arts of death as an assassin?”

While it is the king who speaks, the regent’s eyes bore into me, hungrier for the answer than even the king. “I have been trained in the art of weaponry, Your Majesty, for protecting those I serve. I have also studied poisons so that I may detect them when the need arises. But surely you know all manner of things may be used for good or ill.”

“Answer the question.” Although General Cassel does not raise his voice, it cracks through the room like a whip.

“Yes. That was one of the many things we learned at the convent. We also
trained in the care and anointing of the dead, the departing of souls, and how to ease the pain of the dying.”

The king leans back in his chair, satisfied. “Two days ago, I would have believed everything you said here this morning unequivocally, for who would accuse such an obedient and humble demoiselle of what Monsieur Fremin suggested? But surely you can see how your true background gives much credence to his claim.”

“Your Majesty, I am still precisely who I was two days ago — a woman who loves her queen and her sisters and wishes only to serve their best interests. I serve you, as her lord and husband and my king, as well.”

“Even so, I must consider Monsieur Fremin’s accusations carefully. Unlike most ladies, you have the wherewithal to carry them out. You, too, are dismissed. And like Fremin, you are not to leave the palace without permission. If you’d like to prove your innocence, you’d best find those men-at-arms.”

It is all I can do to keep my feet firmly under me and not stumble out of the chambers.

The king knows of the convent. He knows I am an assassin. We have, all of us, been exposed to our enemies.

The question is, how?

Of a certainty the queen did not tell him.

Could Rohan have sent word? I wince, remembering how boldly I taunted the man with my connection to the convent when he first arrived in Rennes with the news that he was to replace Lord Montauban as governor of Brittany. But surely if Rohan had informed the king, his message would have arrived long ago. And the king did not know two days ago, else he would never have ruled in my favor over Fremin.

It takes but the span of two heartbeats before the answer crashes into me.

Genevieve.
I am half tempted to follow him so I may report back to Sybella, but have too recently learned how awry well-intentioned interference can go. Not to mention that, if what I understood is correct, Sybella herself is a d'Albret.

I can scarcely credit it. There is no family resemblance between her and Pierre. The only point of commonality was the cold, hard look that was on her face earlier for the briefest of seconds.

And who are these sisters of hers? Are they from the convent as well? Pierre d'Albret's household?

While I do not fully understand what just transpired in that room, Sybella's ability to maintain her composure in front of the king and his court, then pivot to the role of a distressed sister with such believability that it nearly brought a tear to my own eye was a wonder to behold.
She comes striding out of the salon just then, her mask still firmly in place, her hands clenched, her face white. I wait long enough to be certain she is not followed, then slip unobtrusively behind her as she passes the tapestry. She continues in silence until she reaches the stairway. Once there, she climbs three steps, glances to either side to be certain no one is about, then looks down at me. That is when I can see that the paleness of her face is due to fury rather than fear.

“What did you say to the king to sour him against me?”

“You are a d’Albret. Is that not enough?”

“He has known I was a d’Albret since I first arrived and has not held me in suspicion before.” She grasps the iron railing. “Where were you last night when I came looking for you? You weren’t on a mission for the convent, since you had not heard from them.” She takes a step toward me. “And so I ask myself, why were you not announced, if not on an assignment? And I will tell you, I do not like the answer.” She stares at me, her breathing fast and hard. I open my mouth to answer, but she talks over me. “Where. Were. You.”

I have no choice but to tell her. The entire court will find out soon enough. “With the king.”

She glares at me. “You were sleeping with the king.”

I shrug. “Not sleeping exactly.”

She grits her teeth. “So you were bedding him?”

Sleeping sounded so much better. I nod.

Quicker than an arrow released from a bowstring, she is upon me, her hand grabbing my chin and bringing it close to hers. “You betrayed us.” Her voice is a low, furious hum, her anger a solid wall that has me wanting to take a step back, but her fingers are like a vise. “You aren’t here hoping for a be-damned crow feather. You have some hidden agenda of your own. One that involves destroying the queen.” She shoves my face away from her. “You have exposed us all to the king.”

And there it is, the ugly, brutal kick I have waited for, all the more painful for being delayed long enough to allow hope to take root. As I struggle to find words to explain, she descends another step toward me. “Was it to get even with the
convent for ignoring you longer than you liked? Or has your loyalty to Brittany been eroded by your years in France?"

"Disloyalty was never my intention!" Desperately needing a moment to regain my footing, I glance at the deserted landing. "Surely we do not need to discuss this where any wandering ears can hear."

In answer, she turns and strides up the stairs. Something hot and ugly uncurls inside me, filling my skin so that I fear it will burst. At first I think that it is my own temper flaring to match Sybella's, but it is more corrosive than that. Shame, I realize with a shock. This thick, suffocating feeling is shame.

When she reaches the landing, she whirls around to face me again, blocking my ascent. "Is that why Margot died? Did she discover your plans for treachery?"

Her words slam against my chest and send me reeling backwards. I grip the bannister. "No!"

"Your word is meaningless to me," she says, but something in my manner must convince her, for some of the reckless fury fades from her face. "What are you doing here, Genevieve?"

"Must we discuss this in the hallway?" It takes all my training to keep the pleading note from my voice.

She gives a brusque nod, then strides to the fourth chamber on the right and motions me inside. The door closes behind us with a click of foreboding. "Very well. We are alone. Now you can explain this treachery of yours."

That she would leap to such a conclusion hurts deeply. "Why are you so certain that I betrayed you?"

"Because the king knows I am from the convent of Saint Mortain and what we do there. He did not know that two days ago." Her expression hardens as the threads she has grabbed hold of begin to form a pattern. "You said you were with the king last night. Is that why you are poisoning the queen?"

Her accusation knocks all the air from my lungs. "No! Not the queen!"

Her eyes grow so frigid that I feel an actual chill scuttle across my arms. "But you are poisoning somebody."

"No! Not now."
She tilts her head. “But . . . ?”

“It had nothing to do with any of this. It was when I left Cognac, the only way I could escape.” There. I said I had to escape. Surely she’ll begin to understand now.

“Or was it the only way you could worm your way into the king’s bed and betray everything the convent stands for? Do you have any idea how much you’ve put at risk? Any idea whose lives might be ruined?” For one heart-stopping moment, I am certain she is considering killing me where I stand. “How much danger complete innocents will be in because of you?”

Her words pour over me like acid, the burn of it mixing with the searing shame I already feel. “I was trying to save them, you rutting sow, if you would only let me explain.”

She folds her arms and raises her eyebrows. “I am listening.”

I force myself to draw a full breath. “I told you, we had not heard from the convent for five years. Nothing.”

As I talk, she crouches down to peer at the rug, tilting her head sideways as if examining the surface. When I pause, she looks up at me. “Continue,” she says curtly.

“Margot . . . Margot got tired of waiting and entered into a liaison with Count Angoulême. That is how she died.”

The hand she had been running over the rug stills. “He killed her?”

“Not with his bare hands, no, but she became pregnant and died giving birth to his bastard.”

“Merde.” She shoves to her feet, her gaze flitting briefly to me before she goes to the window. “Go on.” She yanks the curtains aside.

“When the count told me that the duchess and king were to be married, I didn’t believe it. France consuming Brittany was everything we’d been fighting against.”

“She was out of choices,” Sybella mutters as she examines the latch closely.

“That’s what the count said. I took comfort in the fact that I would be in a perfect position to help her now, with all my connections at court and the
knowledge I’d gathered over the years about all the courtiers, not to mention the king and the regent.”

She pauses long enough to stare at me. “That was precisely the sort of aid we were hoping for.” In disgust, she looks back at the window and runs her fingers over the casing, wincing at something.

“What is it?”

“A nick in the wood.” She begins rubbing her finger over it, as if trying to smooth it away. “Keep talking.”

“But much to my dismay, I still received no call from the convent. When Count Angoulême left for the wedding, I demanded he take me with him."

The corner of her mouth quirks. “I wager he loved that. Princes of the Blood do so enjoy being ordered about.”

“I told him I needed to be somewhere the convent could find me, but he refused.”

“You could have just followed him.”

“I would have, but he had other news as well. News he claimed was from the convent.” She stops rubbing the wood and looks at me. “The news was that, by order of the king, the convent of Saint Mortain was being disbanded.” For the first time since I have begun talking, she gives me her full attention. “His followers were to be farmed out to other convents or married off to willing husbands. I was now Angoulême’s legal ward, and he was to find a suitable husband for me.”

“But no such thing has happened! How could you not know he was tricking you?”

“Of course that was my first thought,” I snap. But how to explain the many signs that seemed to point to the same conclusion. “I considered such a possibility carefully, but he had a message bearing the wax seal of the convent. It was signed by the abbess. And he had never lied to me before. I could not discern a reason he would do so now. And believe me, I considered it thoroughly. But I could never see what he would gain, except the animosity of the convent, and he has always struck me as too self-serving to incur such wrath without good reason.”
Sybella opens the windows and runs her hand carefully along the window-sill. “And so you left.”

“Not right away, no.” How do I explain to her the utter betrayal I felt? The sense of aloneness. “Margot had died but three days earlier,” I say softly. “We had been like sisters, and I . . .” Her fingers still, and she frowns before retrieving a tiny scrap of cloth. She holds it up for closer inspection.

How to explain the enormity of what I’d lost? Not just with Margot’s death, but in the year preceding it? “And there was her babe. I wanted to stay long enough to see if it lived.”

Sybella shoves the scrap into the pocket of her gown. “And did it?”

“Yes. She did.”

“That’s good news, then,” she says softly. “We must see that the babe is well cared for.” She moves away from the window toward the bed, then drops to her knees to peer under it. “So then you left,” she prompts.

“Eventually. I needed time to study the situation. To consider all my options carefully. I also needed to ensure they didn’t come immediately after me. So I waited and I plotted, and when the time was right, I left.”

She remains on the floor a few more moments before finally pushing to her feet. She looks up to meet my eyes. “Did you leave with the intention of bedding the king?”

Something in her eyes, her face — mayhap her soul — forces the truth from me. “Yes.”

She looks down and concentrates on brushing off her hands. “And how was that supposed to save us? Here —” She motions toward the rich coverlet on the bed. “You grab one end, I’ll take the other.”

Grateful to have something to do with my hands, as well as something to look at besides her scornful countenance, I grab the corners and help her carry the entire thing over to the window. “I’m listening,” she says sharply.

It is easier to talk with her attention focused on the richly embroidered coverlet rather than me. “When I was last at court, the king took a fancy to me. There was no reason to act on it at the time — the convent had not ordered me to, and there was nothing to be gained. But he did promise to grant me any favor
I should wish if I would grace his bed. In spite of my assurances to the regent that I had no intention of bedding the king, she had Margot and me sent to Cognac. When I heard that it was by the king’s orders that the convent had been disbanded, I realized I did, at last, have something I truly wished from him.”

I stare out the window, remembering the absolute certainty I felt in that moment, as if a long-missing piece of my life had finally clicked into place — that I had found my destiny. The memory sears my throat.

“Since he had already disbanded the convent, there was no reason for me to think he didn’t know about us. And to be honest, I would have assumed the French crown’s own spies would have at least caught wind of us and reported it to him. Especially with the former chancellor Crunard working so closely with both the regent and the convent.”

I shift my attention from the window and raise my chin slightly. “So that was my intent, to receive clemency for the convent and prevent unwanted fates for the other girls there.”

Sybella stops rubbing at a spot she’s found on the quilt and lifts her eyes to mine, her brief flicker of understanding quickly shuttered. “So that was your plan. Galloping in on a destrier, fulfilling the king’s carnal desires, then requesting a dispensation for the convent because of it.”

Under the weight of her scorn, all of my careful considerations and deliberations seem as thin and tattered as a beggar’s cloak. It was a good plan. Would have been if any of what Angoulême had told me was true.

At last she lifts one shoulder. “I have heard worse.” Although her words are begrudging, they feel like a rousing approval.

I return my attention to the coverlet. “What are we looking for?”

“Any signs that Monsieur Fremin’s men were in here.”

“You think that they were?”

A chilling smile plays about her lips. “I know they were. This is where I killed them.”

I do not think she means the explanation to be a threat, but it feels like one, all the same.
I leave Sybella’s room and begin walking. I have no idea where to go, wishing only to ward off the howling blizzard of regret and recrimination that threaten to engulf me. I had not expected the king to act so swiftly on the information I had given him, or that he would so easily identify Sybella. He would not have if she had not come to my room this morning. Had not tried to reach out to me. More than ever, I am beginning to fear there is truly no way to fix this disaster, or even lessen its impact.

I am halfway to the servants’ chapel before I realize that is where I’m headed. I need the world to stand still for a moment. To quit shifting and changing so rapidly that I cannot catch my breath. Once, when I was but five years old, the tavernkeeper Sanson took me and my mother to visit the sea. It was a warm day, and they let me play in the water. Until a giant wave sucked the sand from beneath my feet and cast me backwards, end over end, so that I could no longer tell where the water ended and the sky began.

That is how I feel now, only Sanson’s strong, sturdy arm is not there to lift me from the current that threatens to sweep me away.

Fortunately, the chapel is empty, its simple stone walls and small votives far more comforting than the grandeur of the palace’s main chapel. My backside has barely settled onto the plain wooden bench when a voice behind me says, “So you are our missing assassin.”

I leap up, my hand moving toward the knife hidden amongst my skirts. An old priest with fluffy white hair stands there, and while he looks kind enough, I cannot help but remember the vitriol in the eyes of the priests in the council room this morning. “Forgive me, Father, but I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”
He shrugs. “I have seen you pray.”
My lip curls in derision. “And that makes you think I’m an assassin?”
He tilts his head, his eyes considering. “There is something about the way you daughters of Mortain bow your heads. Not as lowly penitents, but as a dedicate ready to serve a beloved lord.”
For all his fluffy hair and pink cheeks, he is no fool.
“What is a hedge priest doing at the court of France?”
“No mere hedge priest, my child, but a follower of Saint Salonius.”
“The patron saint of mistakes?” My laugh echoes harshly in the small chapel.
“Then I have certainly come to the right place.”
“If you have made a mistake, then perhaps you have.”
“What I have made is to a mistake as a mountain is to an anthill.” The desolation rises up once more.
“You have spoken with Lady Sybella, I presume?”
“Oh, we’ve spoken.”
“She has been looking for you for some time. I know she will be glad for your presence.”
While his words are meant as comfort, they cut like broken glass. “I do not think she would agree with you,” I mutter.
He cocks his head to the side, watching me like some little bird patiently waiting for a plump worm to emerge from the ground.
I do not know if his kind regard coaxes the next words from me or if my own self-loathing forces them out. “Let us just say my arrival did not go as planned.”
“Or perhaps”—he spreads his hands in a beneficent gesture—“you are tasked with a different plan. One the gods have not seen fit to share with you.”
His words are so close to the misguided reasoning that got me into this mess that I nearly snap his head off. “I do not want to hear of the gods or saints or any of their rutting plans.”
My outburst does not deter him in the least. “Then what would you like to talk about?”
I am quiet for a moment, thinking. “The sisters Sybella mentioned. Who are they?”

“They are not of Mortain, but born into the family that raised Sybella. She has taken them under her wing in an effort to keep them from the wickedness of their own family.”

“The d’Albrets?”

His nod is a simple gesture, but conveys a deep regret. “Yes.”

This time, I truly fear I will retch. I had thought I understood the nature of the disaster I have wrought, but in this moment realize my valiant plan to save the convent has put two innocent girls in immediate danger. Not to mention all of those at the convent once the ripples of my revelations begin to reach them.

“My child, are you well?” The priest lays his hand on my arm, his touch as light as a moth’s wing.

“No.” The bleak word escapes before I can catch it, as if the old priest has some power to call such weaknesses from me. I have destroyed the convent’s trust in me and am so far out of the king’s favor I may as well be in the Low Countries. Even if I see him again, he will not listen to any explanations or exhortations I can make. “I have ruined everything,” I whisper.

“You’d be surprised at how resilient the world — and yourself — can be.”

Again, he is offering comfort. Comfort that is not warranted. “It is not simply my own life I have ruined, but others.” So many others.

He is quiet a long moment. “Then perhaps you have come to make your confession.”

I open my mouth to correct him, then stop. I am desperate to thrust some of this dark, hot misery from me. To find some way to divest myself of this guilt and shame. Perhaps this kind stranger whose eyes seem to hold three lifetimes of wisdom is the one to hear of it. “Mayhap I have, Father.”
Once Genevieve is gone, I lean against my door, grateful for the solid wood at my back as I fight down the sour taste of panic. What has she done?

Even though I am furious with her, I must acknowledge the part my own hand played in this. If I had not evicted Lady Katerine from the king’s bed, he may not have resumed his interest in Genevieve. If I had approached her in the chapel or followed her once I guessed who she was . . . but I was consumed by my own worries and obsessions.

And what part does Count Angoulême play in all this? In spite of my anger, my heart aches for Genevieve. For the journey she has set herself on. A journey that I can only pray will lead her through her own anger and bitterness. A journey I recognize all too clearly, having made a similar one myself. I do not envy her trying to put this aright.

But the sympathy I should feel for Genevieve is overpowered by my fear of what may come of her actions. She has only the faintest inkling of what she has set in motion. Of whom she has endangered.

My sisters are gone from here, I reassure myself. Beyond Fremin’s greedy grasp, beyond the king’s reach, and the regent’s machinations. Beast, Aeva, and the entire queen’s guard are with them and have sworn by the Nine to keep them safe.

But it won’t be enough, not if the king decides to act on the infor-
mation Genevieve has shared with him. There is a very good chance that all of
them — Annith, Ismae, the older nuns, and the youngest novitiates — could be
in harm’s way. I would pray for them all, but who, now, do I pray to?

I shove away from the door, cross the room to my small trunklet, and open
the lid. The holly berry still appears bright red, and the leaves a vibrant green
— until I bring it closer. Then I see the edges have begun to brown. Why? Why
now? Is it simply the miracle of Mortain fading, much like he himself eventually
will? Or is it a reflection of my own wilting faith?

Afraid I will break the sprig in its new fragile state, I place it carefully in
the trunk. As I do, my fingers brush against the black pebble Yannic gave me.
Bewildered, I touch it again. It is not my imagination. The pebble feels warm, as
if it has been out in the sun.

I had thought it blessed by Mortain, but Yannic had indicated I was wrong.
Blessed by whom, then?

It is as smooth as polished glass, and I close my fingers around it, letting
the warmth comfort me. It speaks of mysteries that still exist in this world. The
mysteries that have come to me before and may yet again.

I move to put the pebble back in the trunk, then pause, deciding to slip it
into the pocket at my waist, savoring its gentle heat against my leg through the
silk of my skirts. I will need every bit of comfort I can muster for the conversa-
tion I must have with the queen.

It is too late to disturb the queen — she has already retired for the night. I
am too restless to go back to my chamber. My thoughts keep circling back to
Beast and the girls, even though I know he will get them safely to the con-
vent. But saints, I miss him already — and it has only been three days. I told
Beast the girls were my heart, but that was only partly true. He is my heart
as well, and it feels as if I have carved off a piece and dared rabid wolves to
feast upon it.

He would be greatly insulted by my worrying. And in truth, it galls me
somewhat, even though I can no more stop it than I can halt the blood flowing in my veins.

I am not surprised when I find myself standing outside the servants’ chapel. There is only one person with whom I can share this disaster. Only one sworn to silence by virtue of his priest’s robes.

Father Effram looks up from the brace of fresh candles he is lighting, smiling as if he’s been expecting me. I head directly for the confessional booth. He slips into the other side.

“Have you heard?” I murmur as soon as his door is shut.

“The palace does seem to be in a mild uproar this afternoon.”

I quickly fill him in on Genevieve’s arrival and subsequent actions. “Yes,” he says when I have finished. “She paid me a visit earlier. You just missed her.”

_Just missed her._ The words poke at my memory. “You were the one who led me to the chapel that day. I had no intention of praying. You knew who she was, didn’t you?”

I hear the faint whisper of fabric as he shrugs. “Let us say suspected.”

So he, too, played a part in all this. “Do you think she is telling the truth?”

“I do. She has asked to meet with the queen, is eager to make her apology and offer whatever aid she can to set things right.”

“Or she wishes to get close enough to harm her,” I mutter.

“You don’t truly believe that.”

His calmness scrapes on my nerves like a rasp. “She’s not simply made some little mistake that is easily fixed. Monsieur Fremin has reported his missing henchmen to the king and has accused me of being responsible for it. With Genevieve’s confession, he has made a shrewd guess about me and is now inclined to give serious weight to Monsieur Fremin’s claims. And if anything happens to my sisters, she will pay for it with her —”

“It is not her fault.” Father Effram’s voice is no longer gentle, but a bracing slap.

“Of course it is her fault. It no longer matters that she meant well — she has set in motion the ruin of everything, including the lives of those I care deeply about.”
“You think she is more powerful than the gods and saints?”

“No, but since you speak of them, shouldn’t Mortain have foreseen this before he gave up his godhood?”

“How do you know that he didn’t?”

I feel like a rabbit stunned by a hunter’s club. “Are you saying he knew?”

“I’m saying that what the gods set in motion is not knowable to mere mortals. We are simply caught up in the movement of their dance and there are still eight gods, each of them more than willing to meddle in the affairs of mortals for their own purposes.” The thought is terrifying. My fingers drift to the small weight resting against my leg and the faint warmth it gives off. “Does the Dark Mother meddle in the affairs of mortals?” The words bring not a chill, but a faint wash of heat along my skin. “Is she behind this?” There is a rustle of woolen cloth as he shrugs. “I would not say she meddles so much as when one thing dies and gives way to the new, it is she who guides that process. If we let her.”

I am quiet a moment before saying, “The holly branch is dying.”

“What holly branch?”

“The one I brought with me from Rennes. It stayed green this entire time, until this morning.” A thought floats by, and I grasp at it. “Could it be that it’s simply too far removed from its source? Where the remnants of Mortain’s power cannot reach? Or is it simply his power withdrawing from the world, just as he has done?”

The question renews the familiar anger I have carried since that eventful battle. “Did Mortain know that by choosing life, he would leave his faith and followers to the jackals?”

“Did he know it would fade? Yes. The passing of the Nine has been coming for a long time. We have all known it. Ever since we signed the original agreement with the Church.”

Agreement? What agreement? But before I can voice the question, he continues.

“Do not begrudge him love, child. That love provided him something to move toward rather than simply cease is a gift beyond measure. One I’ve no doubt the Dark Matrona herself had a hand in.”
“So you are saying she is guiding this?”

“No, it is but one among many possibilities. We have all been given a part to play, and play it we must. Only at the end, if then, will we know if we were hero or villain.”

Anger spikes through my gut. I am sick of these riddles. “I refuse to accept that.”

“You are not meant to accept it. To accept it would change the outcome of the dance.”

“Then what am I to do?” I spit out.

He is quiet so long that I fear I have finally gone too far and offended him. Just as I open my mouth to apologize, he speaks.

“Remember,” he says simply, “you and Genevieve are not only mortal, but part god as well. It is not simply Mortain’s blood that flows in your veins, but his divinity, too.”

Against my thigh, the small pebble burns like a brand.
Chapter 6

The news I must share with the queen fills me with dread. I’ve no desire to drag this fresh disaster to her door, nor the possible repercussions. But I made the mistake of not telling her in the past, which proved worse. And Genevieve’s actions will affect her most directly.

I wait until Elsibet steps away from the bed, then curtsy. “Good morning, Your Majesty.” While the queen smiles in welcome, she is pale and her skin clammy. I snag Elsibet’s elbow. “I need to speak with the queen alone. Can you make the others disappear?”

She shoots me one quick glance of concern. “But of course, my lady. Heloise? Could you assist me?”

Heloise collects a covered basin from the bedside, then hurries after Elsibet, casting a curious look my way.

When we are alone, the queen frowns. “Lady Sybella.” She lowers her voice. “Is everything all right?”

I cannot help but wonder when she will ever be allowed to find the happiness — or even simply the peace — that she so deserves. “I’m afraid matters are developing faster than we would have wished.”

She sits up a little higher against the pillows. “Which matters are those?”

“The men who accompanied Monsieur Fremin have gone missing.” I keep my voice casual, as if merely discussing the latest gossip. “The lawyer is most overwrought and went at once to the king. He seems to think that I am behind their disappearance.”

Her eyes never leave mine. “But that is ridiculous. How could a lady like yourself have had anything to do with men like that?”

“That is precisely what I pointed out, Your Majesty. Indeed, when
they went looking for me this morning, they found my room empty, not just of me, but of my sisters as well.”

The queen says nothing, but a small satisfied smile plays about her lips. Truly, one could not ask for a better ally.

“I told the king that it was obvious that Monsieur Fremin, not liking the king’s decision, sent his men to take the girls by force.”

She smiles briefly. “I am certain you are correct. Let us hope the king will now put the matter to rest.”

“Unfortunately, the king is inclined to give more weight to Monsieur Fremin’s words than mine.”

She frowns in surprise. “Why?”

*Merde,* this is hard. “Because he has learned of my involvement with the convent of Saint Mortain and the nature of my service.”

Her already pale face grows even whiter. “Who would have told him such a thing?” she whispers.

I close my eyes briefly. While news of my exposure alarms her, what I have to say next will hurt her. “That is the one piece of good news. It appears the convent’s hidden initiate returned to court.”

Her eyes harden in anger. “And blabbed your identity to the king? Surely that is not something one with your sort of training would do.”

“It was an attempt to help, Your Majesty. She had been told the king already knew of the convent, and had ordered it disbanded, the novitiates farmed out to the Church or suitable husbands.”

There is a long beat of silence as the queen digests this. “And how did she think confirming such revelations about the convent would help?”

“She thought she could persuade the king to reverse his decision.”

Never the lackwit, the queen’s interest sharpens. “Persuade him how?”

No amount of gentleness will soften the blow. “The king had expressed an interest in her once, long before you came to court. She thought to use that interest to extract a favor on behalf of the convent.”

The queen’s face grows as cold as marble. “Are we certain the girl is working
for us? Our enemies could not have done a better job of weakening what few advantages we hold.”

“I believe she is, but I have only spoken with her twice. Father Effram believes she was sincerely trying to help.”

“We can do without that sort of help,” she snaps.

“I agree. But there is some other plotting afoot here. She was shown a letter supposedly written by the abbess, and examined it carefully for signs of forgery. It appeared genuine. Someone wanted her to believe that it was.”

“But who?”

“My assumption is Count Angoulême, the man acting as her liaison with the convent. But why he would risk making an enemy of the convent when he has long been our ally, I don’t know. I intend to speak with Genevieve more about it when I can.”

There is a rumble of commotion just outside her chamber and a sense of many heartbeats approaching. My eyes widen in alarm as I recognize one of them. “The king is here!”

“Fetch my chamber robe!” She throws off the covers and swings her legs out of bed.

As I help her into the robe, I talk quickly. “He will no doubt want to know if you were aware of the convent and my association with them. He has called in two of the bishops from Langeais. I tried to make the convent sound as inconspicuous as possible, but there is only so much innocence to be protested when serving death.”

She nods, eyes firmly fixed on the door.

“I think . . . I think finding me here will not soothe matters. It will be best if I remain out of sight.”

“I agree.” She waves her hand toward the garderobe. I have only a moment to secure my hiding place — then the deep voices are inside the room.

“Your Majesty.” The queen’s voice drifts up from the floor where she has sunk into a deep curtsy.

“My lady wife.” The king’s voice is cold and polite. “I tried to visit yesterday, but you had retired early. Are you unwell?”
From the tone of his voice, it is clear that he suspects it was an excuse to avoid him.

“It is just a passing malady. Please do not trouble yourself over it.”

“What if it is not some passing thing, my lady? What if it is something more diabolical than that?” This voice is deeper than the king’s.

“Bishop Albi. It is good to see you again, although pray forgive my state of dishabille. If I had known you were coming, I would have dressed myself with all the honor you deserve.”

“And yet you ignore his questions.” It takes me a moment to recognize the voice of the Bishop of Angers, the king’s confessor. “Why is that, I wonder?”

“I was not ignoring anything the good bishop said, but merely granting him full courtesy.”

“Why do you not share his concern that there is something more nefarious behind your illness?” the king demands imperiously. “Could it be that you truly do not know that one of your attendants is an assassin?”

After a thick moment of silence, the queen says, “My lord husband, I assure you —”

He speaks over her. “Did you know that Lady Sybella is an assassin from the convent of Saint Mortain?”

“I know that she serves the convent of Saint Mortain, yes. But as for her being an assassin —”

“Does she serve the patron saint of death or not?” The king’s voice rises.

“I just told you she did. But that is far different from being an assassin.”

“So you did know!” A brief, charged silence hangs in the air.

“Of course I knew.” When the queen answers, her voice is as close to deriding as I have ever heard it. “What sort of ruler would I be if I did not know all of my country’s customs and religious orders?”

“But she is an assassin!” The king nearly sputters his outrage.

“She serves the patron saint of death, just as our knights serve Saint Camulos and our scholars and healers serve Saint Brigantia.”

“No matter how you try to paint it with pretty words, she is an assassin, and you have brought her into your lord husband’s court,” General Cassel says.
“The Nine are fully sanctioned by the Church, and have been for hundreds of years.” The queen’s voice rings out firmly. “That they have fallen out of fashion in France does not change that.”

“Maybe it should,” the Bishop of Albi mutters.

“That you would think so speaks to your lack of piety, not ours,” the queen says coolly.

The king interrupts their exchange. “You used these worshipers of death?”

“It was war.” The queen’s exasperation hardens her words to steel. “We both used what tools we had available to us. Every noble house in Europe has some kind of poisoner or assassin to serve them. The Breton court is not alone in this. Besides, none of your people were assassinated, so the point is moot.”

“I have never used assassins.” The king’s voice is both boastful and petulant.

“That may well be true, but you had other tools in your arsenal that were no less deadly.” The queen’s voice shifts, as if she is in a council meeting discussing some point of philosophy. “Tell me, my lord, do you truly think it more noble to bribe my closest advisors into betraying me than to hire an assassin? How noble and fair-minded was it to capture Chancellor Crunard’s last living son on the battlefield and ransom him, not for gold, but for treason and his father’s honor?”

“Your Majesty,” General Cassel’s voice interrupts. “We are not here to recount every action taken in the long war between France and Brittany.”

“Hold!” The king’s voice sounds pained. “Tell me more about Chancellor Crunard, Madame.”

“You didn’t know.” The queen’s words are filled with amazement. “You didn’t know Chancellor Crunard’s son was held to ensure the chancellor would deliver me into the hands of France? But surely you were aware that Marshal Rieux, Madame Dinan, and Madame Hivern were all paid handsome sums of gold to betray me. My entire council was in your pocket.”

“Can you prove these accusations?” The king’s voice is strained.

“I do not need to prove them. They all confessed. And since it was those who served the patron saint of death who discovered their betrayal, I can see why you would resent such efficient weapons in my arsenal. But we are on the same side now.” Her voice softens a bit, as if to remind him of this most relevant
fact. “Furthermore,” she continues, “not one of those traitors is dead, so your fears of assassination are misplaced.”

The silence that follows is so deep and wide, it feels as if a chasm has opened up in the room.

“You really didn't know?” the queen asks at last, her voice sounding younger than it has all morning. Hope, I realize. That he did not know fills her with hope.

“No.” The word cracks through the silence like a stone through a window. “I did not know any of this.” There are no further words, and only the clip of the king's boot heel as he leaves the room. It is followed by a rustle of fabric and a shuffling of feet as his advisors hurry to catch up to him.

The queen waits for a quarter of an hour before calling softly, “You can come out now.”

I emerge from my hiding place. “I am impressed, Your Majesty. You not only neutralized his main offense, but managed to point out his own egregious tools of war.”

“Tools he had no idea were even being used.” Her voice is bemused. “It is hard to believe they would keep something like that from him. There is only one person who would have dared to send such orders in his name.”

It is becoming clear where the seeds of his lack of trust and confidence have sprung from. “We do not know how long his displeasure with his sister will distract him from his displeasure with us, but it is a reprieve, and I will gladly take it.”

The queen’s face hardens. “When you can do so without rousing suspicion, bring this Genevieve to me.”
When I arrive in the king’s apartments, I find him with his royal perfumer, bent over a tray filled with glass vials. The room is thick with the cloying scent of civet and orange blossoms. Unbidden, a memory of Maraud’s face when he learned the poison I had given him was simply a ruse to force his cooperation comes to me so vividly that it takes my breath away. How will he feel after our last parting, when I had to truly poison him? I quickly hide my face with a deep curtsy. “You summoned me, Your Majesty?”

Dismissing the perfumer, he waves me forward. “So tell me, as an assassin, you stay informed of your queen’s politics, do you not?”

“As much as I can, although the distance and the need for secrecy has made it difficult.”

He lifts one of the small bottles to his nose and sniffs. “What do you know of her Privy Council? They were fiercely loyal to her, were they not?”

Unable to stop myself, I snort, but manage to cover it with a cough. The king’s hand tightens on the thick-cut glass he is holding. “Why do you laugh?”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. I wasn’t laughing, there was something stuck in my throat. But, sire, surely you know that the majority of them were loyal to you? Do you now doubt their loyalty — loyalty you paid handsomely for?”

Chapter 7

Genevieve
His face is unreadable. "And the former chancellor, Crunard? What do you know of him?"

"That he, too, betrayed the queen and pledged his loyalty to you. Although," I add, "the cost was far greater than gold."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely any man's sole surviving son is more precious than coin?" Again my mind goes to Maraud and how his father's betrayal consumed him. It is on the tip of my tongue to ask why the king is questioning me, but my own situation is too precarious.

He places the vial of scent back on the tray with such force that I fear it has shattered. He looks at the wall behind me with such thinly disguised longing and revulsion that it is all I can do not to glance over my shoulder.

"You did not know?" I am so surprised by my realization that it comes out as a whisper.

"It is my kingdom! Are you suggesting I do not know what transpires in it?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty, but the regent has been known to—"

"I am the one asking the questions. You speak at my sufferance."

The words are so out of character for him, so completely outside any way he has ever acted before, that my mouth snaps shut. I lower my eyes. "But of course. I am here to serve you."

He casts a sullen glance my way. "But are you?" His voice is low and still thrums with anger.

"Yes," I say simply. "It has always been my intent. The convent's as well."

"They sent you to my bed?"

"No, they sent me to serve you. That was my only instruction."

He takes a deep breath, nostrils flaring as he pinches the bridge of his nose. When he looks up again, there are so many emotions and conflicts seething in his gaze that I cannot identify any of them. "What am I to do with you?"

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?" I keep my voice light and innocent, as if I am not fearing punishment with every breath I take.

"I mean, I have longed for you for years, finally have you, and now I find it has been like wanting a piece of rotten fruit."
I want to bristle at the comparison, but his mood leaves no room for such indulgences. “Rotten, my lord?” I give thanks that I have had years of experience practicing my sheep’s face.

“Yes.” He steps closer and places a finger in the hollow of my throat, one of the most vulnerable of spots on the human body. The touch is in such contrast to his mood that it is hard not to flinch. “Since you seem to know so very much, tell me.” His fingers drift upward. “What moves has your convent made against France?”

When his fingers tighten around my chin, it is all I can do not to grab him, throw him to the ground, and leave him gasping for breath. But it would not do anything to help me fix what I have broken. And while I am perfectly happy to leave him on the floor, it is not fair for others to have to clean up my mess. I will wear this mask a little longer. “None that I know of, Your Majesty.”

“Then why were you sent here?”

Small truths, I remind myself. “I have asked myself that question for many years now, sire. At first, I thought we were to collect information —”

“A spy.” His fingers tighten, not in threat, but in anger.

I shrug. “All kingdoms spy. However, we were also given instructions to not risk exposing ourselves by reaching out to the convent, so any information we gathered was essentially useless. It was more to educate ourselves on the leanings of the French court.”

“What information did you learn here at court, Genevieve?”

What to tell him? The truth of the last three days or the lie I believed until then?

I remember the look on his face a moment ago — the gaping hole he himself cannot see. Mayhap that is a path out of this mess. The one crack in his defenses that I can slip through. “I learned that Your Majesty is honorable and chivalrous. More so than your advisors — especially your sister — would have you be. I learned that you have a formidable will and a mind of your own. You do what you think is right, no matter others’ opinions.”

His grip on my chin loosens to the point of a caress. “Flattery,” he scoffs,
but that does not hide the hunger I see there. The need he has for someone to recognize his independence and good intentions.

“Far more than flattery, Your Majesty. Did you not free the Duke of Orléans from his cruel captivity and restore his lands to him? Did you not choose peace through marriage rather than raining war down on innocent people?” His hand drops to his side, and he straightens. “Did you not rule in favor of your queen, allowing her to keep her vow to her lady and thus her honor?”

His mouth twists with bitterness. “Do not speak of the Lady Sybella to me.”

“I believe it was one of your finest moments, sire.” Indeed, from my new vantage point, it may be his only one.

He looks out the window. “Dammit, Genevieve, I trusted you!”

“And I you, Your Majesty. I still do.”

He rounds on me. “How long have you known the Lady Sybella?”

“I have never seen her until yesterday morning when she appeared at my door and introduced herself. I left the convent long before she arrived. In truth, I have spent as much time here at court as I did at the convent. I arrived when I was seven and left when I was twelve. I’ve been at court for five years now. The convent is no more than a distant memory, like family one has not seen in years. And as for having taken any moves against the crown?” I laugh. “I have done nothing but serve you and Madame with every breath I have taken. Indeed, that was my order from the convent — to do precisely that. That was the only order, my lord. And I have carried it out faithfully.”

“Are there more like you?”

I hesitate. But Margot has chosen her own fate and is long gone from this earth. Telling the truth will cost her nothing and could help the others. “There was one other. The Lady Margot.”

He tilts his head at the name. “Have I met her?”

“Yes, my lord, when she served the regent here at court. She was sent with Louise and me to Angoulême. But it is of no matter any longer. She is dead now.”

His lip curls in disgust but also, I think, to hide his fear. “Did you kill her?”

“Saints, no!” The accusation stings all the more for being the second time it
has been made. “She did not die by anyone’s hand, but in the most ordinary of ways. While giving birth to a man’s bastard.”

He looks doubtful. “What man?”

“Count Angoulême.”

He draws a sharp intake of breath. “So you deceived him, too.” The words are spoken softly, almost as if to comfort himself rather than extract information from me, so I remain silent. “What other actions have you taken against the crown since you’ve been here?”

“I have not taken any actions.”

“Other than deceiving me.”

“None, sire.”

“You were never ordered to raise your hand against me or anyone here at court?”

“No, Your Majesty. I will swear it on the Holy Bible, on any of the Church fathers’ relics, before the cross that hangs in the church. Take your pick. But I have never acted against you or Madame or anyone here in France.” I do not think relieving a courtier or two of an occasional stiletto or bauble can truly be counted as acting against France.

He grows still. “Does my sister know of your involvement with the convent?”

He has not told her. Even so, the ice beneath my feet is so thin I can hear it begin to crack. “No, Your Majesty. I . . . do not know if she even knows that it exists.”

He studies me a long moment, as if trying to pull the truth from my soul. “Good. Do not speak to anyone of this, not of Sybella, nor your involvement in the convent. You do not fully comprehend all that has been set in motion. If they were to learn of your involvement, I’m not sure even I could protect you.”

Does he mean to protect me from whatever political repercussions the convent’s presence creates? Yes. But not Sybella. He intends to use her as the whipping boy for my sins.

“For now,” he continues, “you may return to your quarters.”

Outrage and frustration at the sheer wrongness of what he is doing keep me rooted to the spot. He looks up. “Did you hear me?”
“Yes, Your Majesty. And thank you for showing me such mercy.”
He says nothing, but jerks his head toward the door.

When I am halfway back to my chamber, the regent swoops down on me like a vulture on a carcass. “You were supposed to keep the king happy,” she hurls at me. “Instead, he is in a foul, melancholic humor. What transpired between you?”

The sheer boldness of the question nearly causes me to blush. I look down and begin fiddling with the trimming on my skirt. “I’m not sure what you mean, Madame. The king seemed most pleased—”

“Do not play games with me,” she says impatiently. “What did you discuss? Did he share any of his current thoughts or troubles? Whom has he been speaking with of late?”

“Our conversation was of a much more intimate nature.”

“When did you leave? Was there time for anyone else to come to his chambers after you left?”

My head snaps up. “I . . . I’m not certain. My mind was not focused on the time.”

She purses her lips, studying me. “Why was Lady Sybella in your chambers yesterday morning?”

I blink at the unwelcome change of subject. I have no idea why the king hasn’t shared my association with the convent with the regent, but the longer I can hold that off, the better. I can use womanly charm to soften the king’s ire, but have nothing with which to soften the regent’s.

“She had heard you had a new attendant and wished to introduce herself.”

“How friendly of her.” The regent’s voice is more acidic than verjuice. “You are to avoid her. She is too loyal to the queen and will sniff out the king’s interest in you like a hound will a fox. Besides, her fortune at court is about to change. Best you are far away so that you are not caught in the undertow.”

A fresh wave of anger surges over me, but all I say is, “Of course, Madame.
I am not here to make friends, but to serve both you and the king to the best of my ability.”

As she disappears down the corridor, I resume my walking. The regent’s warnings ring in my ears, and the king’s handprint throbs upon my chin, both of them doing nothing to calm my growing outrage. The king may expect me to feel grateful for his protection, but he will quickly find that while I may be a fool, I am no coward. I will not let others take the blame for what I have done.
Maraud couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but its absence was palpable. It wasn’t until he laid out his bedroll that it hit him. Lucinda.

And how many different kinds of fool did that make him?

“So, have you decided where we’re going?”
Maraud nodded. “Flanders.”

The others exchanged a glance. “General Cassel?”

He nodded again. Everyone fell silent. “What about d’Albret?” Andry asked. “You had wanted us to check on him — before you asked us to ride ahead and meet up with you. Don’t you still want to know what he’s up to?”

“I do. After I bring Cassel to justice.”

The silence that followed was filled only by the faint crackling of the small fire and the occasional stomp of a horse’s hoof. “Are you sure?” Jaspar’s voice was filled with something Maraud didn’t want to examine too closely.

“Saints, yes.”

“But you said Lucinda needed to save someone. We all agreed to help her.”

“What part of she poisoned me do you not understand?”
“But that’s your thing, Maraud. You’re the savingest mercenary I’ve ever met. Are you going to let a little poison come between you and—”

Maraud met his eyes across the campfire. “No. She made her wishes perfectly clear.”

With a sigh, Jaspar relented.

But not Valine. “You said yourself that she was trying to save you from possible repercussions with the queen and unfair punishment.”

Her words cause something hot and hard to lodge in Maraud’s stomach. “She didn’t trust me enough to let me help.”

“Did you give her reason to?” Valine’s voice is pitched low, low enough that it reaches only him. “She seemed genuinely surprised to see us when we showed up at Camulos’s Cup. You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“Don’t you have first watch?”

“No, Andry does. You told her only half your story, and yet you’re mad because she didn’t trust you? I’d say she was smart not to. And you would too if your judgment wasn’t so clouded.”

“The poison is well out of my system.”

“I wasn’t talking about the poison. We call you Your Lordship for a reason, you know. You can be high-handed and arrogant, so convinced in the rightness of your decisions that you don’t feel the need to include others in the process. I don’t pretend to know all of what went on between you two, but what I saw of her I liked. And I know you. So I ask again, given the position she was in, and your own pigheadedness, did you give her enough reason to trust you?”

Maraud scoffed, but she was already heading for her bedroll and missed it.

Lucinda was pricklier than a thorn bush and possessed the foul temper of a maddened goose. An image she was all too eager to embrace, ensuring the entire world saw her that way.

But thorns were merely a means of self-protection.

“Bollocks,” he muttered. Thoughts — and questions — about Lucinda had haunted him every night since they parted ways. Why did she come riding to his aid at Camulos’s Cup, then refuse his help? It ate at him that he would likely be
dead if she hadn't come back. And she refused to allow him to repay the favor. Why? What was she so afraid of that she was willing to poison him to avoid?

Valine’s question was just one of the many that hounded him the entire way to Flanders.
wake up!” Sybella’s voice yanks me from my sleep. Certain I had locked my door, I reach for the knife under my pillow, then decide she would not wake me up if she intended to kill me. Probably.

“Why, ’tis as if the sunshine itself has appeared in my room,” I mutter.

“You have precisely five minutes to get dressed, else I will take you to the queen in your undergarments.”

I sit up and shove the hair out of my face. “The who?”

“The queen. You wished to speak with her. She has granted your request.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I stand and reach for my gown. “I am surprised she agreed to see me.”

“Our queen has never been one to shy away from facing problems head-on.”

Under Sybella’s cool, dispassionate gaze, I finish dressing, and quickly arrange my hair. She gives me one last second to splash water on my face before saying, “Let’s go.”

She eases the door open, peeks outside, then motions for me to follow. It is early yet, and the hallways are empty.

“Is our meeting a secret?”

She sends me a scathing look over her shoulder. “No. I want to sneak up on the herald before I have him announce our arrival.”
I open my mouth to shoot back a retort but am cut off when she stops walking and shoves me against the wall. Seconds later, a cluster of servants bearing buckets hurries by. Sybella swears, then glances around once more before resuming. “This way.”

Stepping softly, I follow her, hugging the wall like she does so that we are not immediately visible to any passersby. All too soon, we arrive at the double doors of the queen’s apartments. “Stay hidden, then follow once I give the signal,” Sybella whispers. As the sentries open the door to let her in, she twitches her fingers at me, and I slip in close on her heels. I barely have time to take in the sumptuousness of the queen’s solar — the sunlight spilling in from the large oriel windows, the ornately carved wooden legs of the chairs, the gold and red wall hangings — before Sybella urges me along. “Hurry. The regent-appointed attendants will be here any moment.”

I step smartly to keep up with Sybella. When she knocks once on the door, a short, dark-haired woman opens it. She gives me a curious look before slipping out. Sybella takes my arm and pulls me into the queen’s bedchamber.

As soon as we are inside, Sybella dips a curtsy. “Genevieve is here, Your Majesty.”

I sink into a curtsy as well. Sybella quietly removes herself, closing the door behind her.

The queen says nothing for a long time. When she finally speaks, her voice is low with cold fury. “How dare you? You — the convent — serve me. My interests.”

Still in a curtsy, I say, “With all due respect, Your Majesty, we serve the interest of Mortain and those of Brittany.”

There is a sharp intake of breath. “Are you saying I do not serve the interests of either of those?”

“Most assuredly not, Your Majesty. I am only saying that throughout the history of the country, they have not always been one and the same, which is why the convent made certain we understood the distinction.”

“You may stand,” she says with a sniff. “It is too hard to hear you when you talk to the floor.”
I straighten, but keep my eyes downcast, catching only the faintest glimpse of her pale face and dark hair. She is small, I realize. Smaller than I had expected.

“How did bedding my lord husband serve Mortain, pray tell? Or Brittany, if that was your intent.”

Slowly, I raise my gaze to hers, which is filled with deep intelligence, keen wit, and grievous displeasure. “Please know that while my reasoning will sound faulty in the retelling, it seemed solid at the time.”

This causes her finely arched eyebrows to rise — whether in displeasure or surprise at my frankness, I do not know. “However,” I go on to explain, “serving the interests of both Mortain and Brittany was precisely what I was trying to do. There had been rumors that you had been abducted, or perhaps forced into this union. That it was so sudden only served to make those rumors seem likely. I was making plans to come to court to offer my services to you when I was told that the convent was being disbanded. That news seemed to point to the rumors of your coercion being true, and it appeared the worst was coming to pass — you had been taken by the French crown, and they intended to crush the very things that Brittany holds most sacred. How could I not act?”

She inhales deeply and looks away to the fire for a moment. “And how was sleeping with my lord husband to help with any of that?”

“Such is the nature of men, Your Majesty. They will promise you anything once they take a fancy to you. I thought to collect on an old promise.”

Her slim white fingers grip the arms of her chair. “That is not how things work in my world. Indeed, it is I who have always been promised to men as reward for their political support. Or who must make promises and concessions to them once they have shown interest in me. Or my lands.”

Rutting hell. But of course she has been a pawn in men’s games of politics and power. With the sort of men she was expected to marry, she could never, under any circumstances, think to exercise her own choice in any of these matters. “Forgive me. Our circumstances are very different, and my words were poorly chosen.”

“It was not the only poorly chosen part of this entire enterprise.”

“Knowing what I know now, I cannot help but agree with you.”
She blinks, as if not expecting my quick agreement.

“I am doing everything in my power to correct my error, Your Majesty.” I wince, as error seems such a mild word for all that I have thrown into disarray. “I have downplayed the role of the convent in Brittany’s politics and told the king I did not know if you had knowledge of its existence. And while I will always serve as his loyal subject, I will no longer warm his bed. At least, not willingly.” I pause. “Unless you’d like me to?” It is an unwelcome thought, and not an offer made lightly, but if it would serve her in some way, it seems the least I could do.

She stares at me, agog, her cheeks bright pink. “Whyever would I want you to do such a thing?”

I shrug. “There are many reasons. If you are not fond of the marriage bed, you can know that his needs are being met by someone who is loyal to you. Or if you would like to enjoy the marriage bed more, I can teach him better ways to please you.”

The queen’s hands fly to her face, which is a vivid shade of scarlet. “Demoiselle, stop!”

My stomach grows queasy. Am I destined to always misstep with her? “I did not mean to distress you! I thought only to offer my services to make amends any way I can.”

“Well, you may rest assured you have offered me something no one else ever has before,” she says wryly. “Nor will I require that particular service as a path to atonement.”

Her words give me hope that there will be some path to atonement.

“Tell me of this letter you received.”

I tell her of the letter, of how the handwriting looked right, and that the official convent seal was affixed upon it. When I have finished, she stares off into the distance, tapping her finger on her chin. “What could Count Angoulême have to gain from this?”

“I have spent hours pondering that very question and have yet to arrive at an answer.”

“Well, if one occurs to you, please inform me at once.”

That tiny bud of hope inside me unfurls a bit more. “But of course, Your
Majesty.” It is hard to tell, but I think she holds less animosity toward me than when I first arrived. Saints, please let it be so!

I want, more than anything, to prove my loyalty to her. To prove that it is still she and the convent I serve. “Your Majesty, there is something else you should know.”

She stares at me quizzically. “Yes?”

“The regent was glad that I had come back to court and thought to use me in a scheme of her own.”

The queen frowns. “What sort of scheme?”

It is all I can do not to squirm, not for my own sake but because it is still so hard to believe it of the regent. “She wished to install me in her brother’s bed. Only instead of asking clemency for the convent, she wished me to report everything I learned directly to her.”

The queen looks as if she will be sick. “She was the one who placed you in my husband’s bed?”

“No! As much as I would like to blame her for that, it was my own mistake entirely. But she was most invested in using the king’s interest in me for her own ends. I refused. My loyalty was only ever to the convent and Brittany. It was never for sale.”

She is quiet a long moment as she studies me, and I would give a sack of gold coins to know what she is truly thinking. “Thank you for telling me, Genevieve,” she says at last.

Her words bring a flood of relief rushing through my limbs. “The regent is as cunning and devious as a fox, and twice as dangerous. Her ruthlessness in securing the interests of the crown knows no bounds.”

“Oh, believe me, I am aware.” She falls quiet again, and so I wait. I do not know for what — a sentence, required penance, banishment? Or mayhap some task to perform to make it up to her. Instead, she simply dismisses me. Whether that will be the end of it or I must wait for whatever ax she plans to hang over my head, I do not know.
It requires an enormous effort to keep from putting my ear to the door to listen to Genevieve and the queen’s meeting. Instead, I try to look as if I am not waiting, but here for a purpose. I pick up someone’s discarded embroidery hoop and begin stitching, my hands grateful for the small task.

Will the queen punish Genevieve? Banish her? Is that the best thing to be done with the girl? Hard to know if she can be trusted—not simply her loyalty, but her judgment. For all of Father Effram’s assurances that she meant well, it is difficult to imagine giving her a second chance.

Yet how many second chances have I been given?

The outer door opens, and I brace myself for the barbs from the regent’s ladies who attend the queen. My tension eases somewhat when I recognize Elsibet. At least until the look of concern on her face registers.

“My lady, they are looking for you.”

“They?”

“The steward. The king has requested your presence in his chamber at once.”

Merde. What new accusation can Fremin have dreamed up? “Thank you, Elsibet.” I frown at the queen’s door. “Would you please
see that Genevieve is escorted back to her rooms when the queen is done with her? As discreetly as possible, if you please.”

There are two additional faces among the king’s retinue this morning. The Bishop of Albi and the Bishop of Narbonne appear to be part of his council now. This cannot bode well.

Just as he was two days ago, the king’s personal confessor is perched on his left shoulder. To his right stand General Cassel and the captain of the king’s personal guard, Captain Stuart. Beyond them, as if an afterthought — or a puppet master gently pulling the strings — is the regent. Foreboding unfurls inside me, sharpening my senses. Stall them, I remind myself. I must only stall them long enough that Beast can get the girls to the convent. After that, none of this will matter.

The steward escorts me to the middle of the room, then excuses himself. The king says nothing, but pins his gaze on me. “Monsieur Fremin tells me he has not found his men.”

The lawyer is looking faintly smug again. “I have not.”

The Bishop of Albi leans over and whispers something in the Bishop of Narbonne’s ear.

“And you, demoiselle? I presume you have not managed to locate them either?”

“No, sire, but I did learn that a large group rode out three days ago. Perhaps the stable master would be able to confirm if it was Sir Fremin’s men or not.” Of course, those riding out were Beast and the girls, but they made sure to do that well away from the hearing of the stable master — or anyone.

The king’s eyes narrow with speculation. “I will make inquiries. And what of your sisters? Have you located them, by chance?”

I do not have to fake the tension that holds my shoulders in a viselike grip. “No, Your Majesty.” I make my voice tremble along the edges, just enough for him to think I am filled with distress and not considering all of them with the
cold calculation of the assassin he accuses me of being. "But mayhap we should ask the stable master if they were with the group riding out."

"Your Majesty," Fremin interjects. "I must protest. My men would never take their leave without my permission."

The Bishop of Albi gives a smug nod of approval, although why he thinks he would know anything about Fremin’s men and how they would behave is a mystery to me. Perhaps it is simply his faith in the orderliness of the world.

I incline my head politely. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, we have only his word that he has not granted his men permission to leave." I glance at the lawyer, hoping he will consider the out I am about to offer him. "Besides, they are not truly his men, but my brother’s. Who knows what orders Pierre may have given them separate from the orders he gave his lawyer?"

There. I have given the man a chance to shift the responsibility for the men to his liege’s shoulders. If he truly has no part in this, then he will be smart enough to save his own neck and grasp at the sliver of an excuse I have tossed his way. I stare at him, willing him to take it. Surely if what drove me were my d’Albret instincts, I would not do even so much as that.

"That is ridiculous! The men report to me and are mine to command."

And so he chooses. He has erased the last doubt of his complicity. I furrow my brow as if in confusion. "You are certain, monsieur?"

"Of course," he says, thrusting his head into the noose I have tried so hard to protect him from.

"In that case" — I allow my face to harden — "perhaps Monsieur Fremin can explain to us why he had one of his men scale the wall beneath my sisters’ chambers and attempt to get in through the window?"

Surprised silence ripples around the room.

"Your chambers?" the king asks.

The regent speaks for the first time. "That is impossible! You are on the fourth floor overlooking the rear courtyard. There is no external access to your room."

"That is true," I agree. "But there is a wall made of stone, and stones offer the smallest of footholds and handholds. Enough for the Mouse to climb."

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Fremin’s nostrils flare, and his head rears back slightly. I blink innocently at him. “That is his name, is it not? Or do you know him by another?”

He swallows before speaking. “It is but a nickname, Your Majesty. Something the other men call him, for he is small and quiet, not built for combat.”

“Then why bring him if the need for such a large escort was due to unsafe roads?” the king asks, and I nearly cheer at not having to draw that line for him.

A sheen of desperation appears on Fremin’s forehead. “Your Majesty, she is lying! My men would never disrespect your hospitality in such a way, nor would they even know which room she and her sisters were sleeping in.”

The king turns his head to me, as if watching a jousting tournament.

“I am not lying, Your Majesty. I have proof.” I pull the tiny scrap of the Mouse’s tunic from my pocket and hold it out for the king to see. He motions me forward, but does not take the scrap from my hand. Instead, he leans to peer closer. The small square of brown homespun sits in stark contrast to the whiteness of my palm.

Which is not nearly as white as Fremin’s face. “She lies,” he protests again. “That could be any speck of fabric!”

The Bishop of Narbonne reaches toward it. “May I?”

“But of course, Your Grace.”

He takes it from me and examines it. “It is coarse wool, not the sort anyone here at the palace would wear, not even the servants.”

“How do we know she found it where she says she did?” Fremin scoffs.

“Your Majesty, what possible reason would I have for carrying around a small square of homespun just on the off chance that I may someday present it as false proof against a future accusation I could never have foreseen?”

The Bishop of Narbonne’s mouth quirks ever so slightly as he glances up at the king and nods his agreement. The king strokes his chin, eyes lingering on the scrap. “This does seem to support your claim,” he agrees. “Monsieur Fremin, you are dismissed, for now. However, Lady Sybella, you will indulge me by remaining.”

Fremin hesitates, glancing at the regent, but she stares straight ahead, not acknowledging him. He gives a terse bow, then takes his leave.
When the lawyer has left, the king gives me his full attention. “This does not leave you fully in the clear. I have spoken at length with my advisors. Assassins are a dishonorable, barbaric tool that I believe has no place in our — or any monarch’s — court.”

My hands twitch with frustration.

The Bishop of Narbonne shoots him a look that lets me know this is news to him. “Your father used them quite frequently,” he gently points out.

The king’s hands clench into fists. “I am not my father. And even if I were inclined to assassination as a political tool, they are far too powerful a weapon to rest in the hands of my lady wife.”

“Not only that,” his confessor says, “but I believe it calls into question whether or not the queen can truly serve France if she still honors the Nine and their” — he eyes me with distaste — “ways.”

The Bishop of Albi frowns in thought. “What if she were to renounce them?”

“Indeed,” the confessor muses. “Since the king’s right to rule is derived directly from God, it is possible that belief in a saint who trains assassins for his own purposes could be considered heretical.”

A murmur of discussion buzzes through the room.

The bishop nods, warming to the subject. “It is an archaic and barbaric form of worship. It is far past time the Church take this up to examine it in light of adherence to doctrine.”

At his words, a chill takes root deep in my bones. It is not only our political usefulness that is at risk, but the convent’s — and all the Nine’s — survival as well. However, they are sorely mistaken if they think we will give up our own gods without a fight.

**But your god gave you up without a fight.** The realization burrows its way into my heart and will not budge.

“What say you, General Cassel?” the king asks.

The general’s gaze lands on me with all the subtlety of a boulder. “I say that any assassins who do not owe their allegiance to you — and only you — are dangerous and must be rooted out like weeds.”

“He is right, sire,” the Bishop of Albi agrees. “If they come from the convent,
or the Nine, then how are we to know whom they truly serve, let alone how to control them? At the very least, those who follow the Nine should be forbidden from practicing their arts.”

I am unable to keep silent any longer. “Truly, Your Grace? And what of Saint Brigantia? Was it not her acolytes who tended King Louis in his final days, bringing him comfort and succor at the very end?”

The bishop blinks at me, no quick rejoinder at the ready.

“But the Brigantian nuns do not kill people,” the king’s confessor smugly points out.

I tilt my head. “What of Saint Maurice? Will you forbid his worship or the practice of his arts as well?”

“He is not one of the Nine!”

“No, but half the soldiers in France consider him their patron saint and learn their arts in his name, leaving offerings and sacrifices and prayers at his shrines. How is that any different?”

“They do not kill —” The confessor’s words come to an abrupt halt as he realizes my point. “It is different,” he insists tersely. “They follow the earthly orders of their liege.”

“As do we at the convent of Saint Mortain,” I murmur politely.

“The girl is correct. It is not heresy,” the Bishop of Narbonne says.

“It should be,” the confessor says darkly.

“That may well be,” Narbonne says, “but the Church must declare it so. Not us.”

“If you will excuse me, Your Majesty.” All eyes shift to the familiar voice of Father Effram. I did not see him when I came in. The king blinks. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

Father Effram steps forward, hands serenely folded in his sleeves, head bowed. “I am Father Effram, Your Majesty, and the Lady Sybella’s confessor.”

I bite the inside of my lip, lest my own surprise give his lie away.

“It seemed important I be here to give the lady the appropriate spiritual guidance.”
The other bishops are nonplussed. The Bishop of Angers actually sputters. “But you are one of them! You serve one of the Nine!”

Father Effram nods. “Yes, as I am ordained by the Church to do. You are forgetting that in Brittany, we worship Christ as well as His saints. And that the Nine are only a handful of the saints we worship. The others are the precise same ones that you yourself worship — the Magdalene, Saint Christopher, Saint Guinefort, and Saint Michael.”

The regent steps out of the shadows. “This is an important matter, to be discussed at length and in private. Not, I think, in front of the Lady Sybella. Nor any of those who would be affected by such a change.”

The king’s eyes are cool upon her. “Tell me, dear sister, how long have you known?”

The regent blinks. “Known what, Your Majesty?”

“Known of the convent and their purpose?”

“I learned of it when you brought the matter to Lady Sybella’s attention, the first day that Monsieur Fremin announced his men were missing.”

I cannot tell if she speaks the truth or if she is lying. Did none of her spies ever tell her of the convent? Either way, I have so few weapons that I must take chances. “Oh, but she did know, Your Majesty,” I protest. “As did your father. I do not know why they chose not to share it with you.”

The king sets his teeth, a faint flush of red appearing in his pale cheeks. “We will speak of this later, you and I.”

The regent whips her head toward me, her eyes full of murderous intent. Her attack, when it comes, is low and unexpected. “Your Majesty, given what we’ve learned of Lady Sybella, do you still think it appropriate for her to have custody of her sisters?”

He considers me, his gaze distant and assessing. “No. I do not.”

And there it is. My worst fears brought to life. I allow my face to fall. “Your Majesty.” My voice trembles with emotion. “I would remind you that I do not have custody of my sisters. They went missing while under the crown’s protection.”
“You are right, demoiselle. Matters of church doctrine aside, two young girls are missing. Two young girls who fall under the court’s protection, something I take most seriously. I have sent search parties out to scour the area and look for any signs of them. Hopefully we will have news soon.”

The king’s announcement of his search party sets near panic aflight in my chest. How far has Beast gotten? I wonder as I leave the audience chamber, careful to keep my steps slow and even. Between Beast’s need for secrecy and the two girls, he cannot be making good time.

And how far do the king’s men plan to search? Four men such as Fremin’s could cover a lot of ground. Much more than Beast and the girls could have.

Merde. What if he finds them? Then everything will be lost, and all that we have done will have been for nothing.
I smell them long before I can hear them, the stink of their iron weapons acrid in the cool, damp air. I crouch down lower in the bracken and crawl forward on my belly to look over the ridge into the valley below.

There are two, no three, columns of mounted soldiers wearing the king’s colors. They are heading toward the Loire River, but bearing west, toward us. The lines ride one bowshot apart, with some of the men beating at the bush with clubs, as if trying to flush pheasant out of hiding.

A prickle of anticipation runs along my scalp, for these are not mere hunters.

We have been traveling west for two days, staying well south of the river. We did not expect pursuit. Sybella had spun plans upon plans to keep them from noticing our absence. And even if they did, they would search north of the river toward Brittany, which is why we have been heading in a southerly direction, as if traveling to Poitou. But by their formation and crosshatching, it is clear that these men are not merely in pursuit, but searching.

I back away from the ridge. When I am far enough that they will not see me, I begin to run, keeping low and matching the rhythm of my movements to the sounds of the forest, taking a step in time with the cry of a kestrel, moving forward as the wind rustles the branches.

Divona’s ears prick as she hears me coming, but sensing my
urgency, she does not whinny her normal greeting. I vault onto her back, then ride hard to catch up to the rest of the group.

Beast rides behind the others, waiting for me. I warble like a thrush, and he quickly falls back. “How did you hear them?” he asks. “I pride myself on my sharp hearing, and I heard nothing.”

I smile. “Nor did I. I could smell them.”

He gives me an aggrieved look. “Even so, I should have gone, not you.”

“Might as well send a boar crashing through the woods to announce our presence.”

“I can move quietly.” He sounds mildly offended. “What did you learn?”

“Three groups of men, searching in crisscross patterns between the Loire to the north and the Vienne’s southward bend.”

“Camulos’s balls,” he mutters. “How fast are they moving?”

“Faster than us, but their search pattern forces them to cover twice as much ground. They should catch up to us by nightfall.”

“Any indication how far they intend to go?”

“They did not say.”

“No, but since you can smell and hear things that the rest of us cannot, I thought perhaps you’d discerned it through the weight of the gear they carried or the pacing of their horses.”

“Well,” I concede, “they were traveling light, no pack animals. So they are likely planning to spend the night in a town or holding.” I pause. “How far are we from any town or holding?”

“Not far. I had hoped to spend the night in Chinon, but it sits near one of the king’s castles and is likely where they are headed. I do not want to put ourselves so directly in their path.” He glances ruefully at our little party. Eight men-at-arms, two Arduinnites, one lady in waiting, a gnome, and two young girls.

“We cannot outrun them, nor are we close enough to the river to cross it before nightfall.”

Beast looks wistfully at the forest around us. “A cave would be nice. But the saints only know if there is one near here or how we could find it if there was.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that, O Angry One.”
He swings his gaze to me. “I only got angry once,” he mutters. Or growls. I can never be certain with him.

“But it was such a deeply righteous anger. And in all fairness, Sybella deserved it for trying to slink off without telling anyone. Here.”

I slip off my horse, hand Beast my reins, and move a dozen steps away from him. I kneel, spread my palms, and slowly press them into the ground, past the rich leaf mold into the deeper soil below. I close my eyes and slow my breath, allowing my pulse to match that of the earth beneath me. The rhythm is slow and steady, so profoundly comforting that my body hums with the rightness of it. I feel the pulse bounce off the roots of the trees, feel it swerve to avoid a deep boulder thrusting up from the bowels of the earth. It moves more swiftly after that, humming along until it opens up near the surface, then echoes off a small enclosed space.

I stand up and brush off my hands. “There is a cave due west, just before the forest ends. If we hurry, we can make it before they pick up our trail. But it will be close.”